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ABSTRACT

This report presents the fourth in a series of polls that survey the leadership of U.S. major public school systems about the challenges they face and their expectations for the future. The poll surveys school board members, superintendents, and other leadership staff, as well as representatives of colleges and universities who work with the staff and students of the Great City Schools. The survey, administered in October 1999, was completed by approximately 225 people. Urban school leaders and members of colleges and universities who work with the Great City Schools continue to feel strongly optimistic about the future of urban schools. School leaders continue to view business leaders, foundations, and local public officials as the most helpful groups to the urban public school. These leaders' perceptions of both print and electronic media demonstrate the powerful, and often negative, impact these media have on U.S. schools. Improving academic achievement was cited as the number one need of urban schools, with professional development and public confidence remaining among the top most pressing needs. Among the many reform efforts of urban schools, professional development, decentralized decision-making, and class size reduction have been high priorities. In spite of the obstacles they face, urban school leaders remain optimistic about the future of their schools. (SLD)

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ED 440 157

Critical Trends in Urban Education

March, 2000

Fourth Biennial Survey of America's Great City Schools

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Critical Trends in Urban Education:
Fourth Biennial Survey of America's Great City Schools

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Critical Trends in Urban Education: Fourth Biennial Survey of America's Great City Schools

March, 2000

Introduction

Americans rely on public schools to educate and prepare more than 46 million students to become productive members of our society. Yet, many of our public schools, particularly those in our Great Cities, face significant challenges: over-crowded classrooms, teacher quality and shortages, low student achievement, access to preschool, and aging facilities.

This report is the fourth in a series of polls that survey the leadership of America's major urban public school systems about the challenges they face and their expectations for the future. The poll surveys board members, superintendents, and other leadership staff. It also includes representatives of colleges and universities who work with the staff and students of the Great City Schools. The survey was administered at the Council's 43rd Annual Fall Conference on October 13 - 17, 1999. All conference attendees were given the opportunity to respond to the questionnaire. Follow up surveys were mailed to Great City School district leaders. Approximately 225 people responded.

The first report, published in 1994, asked a series of questions about the needs of urban schools and compared the results with national trends published by Phi Delta Kappa in 1993. This poll does not make any comparisons between urban schools and national averages. It does, however, provide trend data comparing this year's data with the results, where appropriate, from the three previous polls (1993-94, 1995-96, and 1997-98). These comparisons allow us to examine important trends in urban school leadership, needs, and reform strategies.

Critical Trends 2000 asked persons to respond to five items:

- How would you describe your sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools?
- Rate the overall help the school system receives from specified groups.

- Identify what you believe to be the ten most important or pressing needs of your urban school district.
- Which of the following measures has your district pursued in its general reform process?
- Rate the top three most effective educational reform strategies.

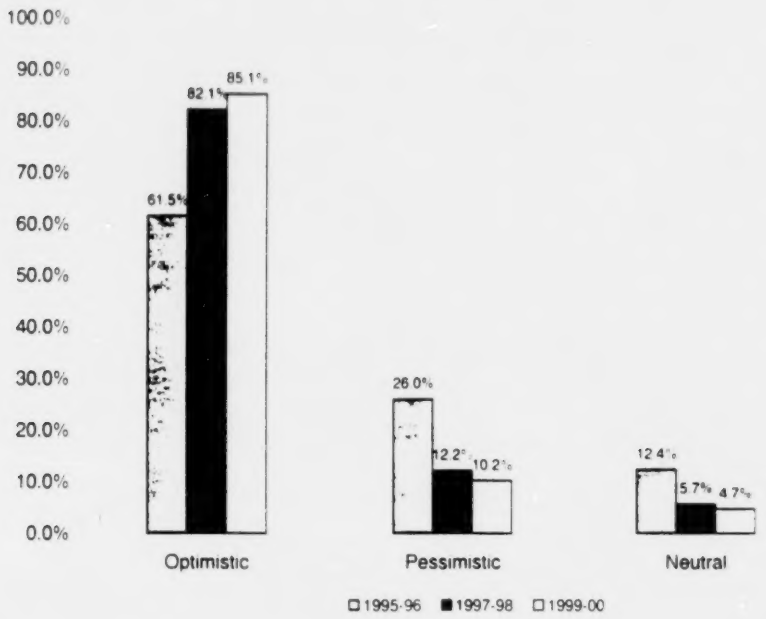
Hope for the Future

Urban school leaders face an enormous number of challenges in their districts. But are urban leaders hopeful and optimistic about the future of their institution and the work they are doing?

The survey asked: *How would you describe your sense of optimism about the future of urban public schools?* Respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from "optimistic" (5) to "pessimistic" (1). Figure 1 displays the results.

Figure 1

Hope for the Future of Urban Schools (1995-96, 1997-98 and 1999-2000)



- 85.1% of respondents indicated that they were either "optimistic" (33.5%) or "somewhat optimistic" (51.6%) about the future of urban schools. Urban leaders have become steadily more optimistic, with these numbers having risen from 61.5% in 1995-96 and 82.1% in 1997-98.

- Only 4.7% responded that they were "neutral" about the future of urban education, compared with 12.4% in 1995-96 and 5.7% in 1997-98.

- Only 10.2% of leaders said they were either "pessimistic" (1.4%) or "somewhat pessimistic" (8.8%). The percentage of persons responding in these categories has continued to decrease, dropping from 26.0% in 1995-96 and 12.2% in 1997-98.

- The percentage of leaders who said they were either "pessimistic" or "somewhat pessimistic" decreased by 16.5 percent between 1997-98 and 1999-2000.

Helpfulness of Others

The challenges faced by urban public schools often necessitate collaboration with others. The federal government, state governments, community groups, businesses, and colleges and universities are just a few of the networks that support urban schools. How do urban school leaders perceive the degree to which these groups are helpful to the urban school agenda?

The survey asked urban school leaders: *How would you rate the overall help the school system receives in pursuing its mission from the following groups?* Respondents rated 17 groups, organizations, and governmental agencies on a five-point scale ranging from "very helpful" (5) to "very unhelpful" (1). Figure 2 displays the percentage of persons who rated each group "very helpful" or "helpful". Table 1 lists and compares these groups in order from most to least helpful according to the 1995-96, 1997-98 and 1999-2000 survey results.

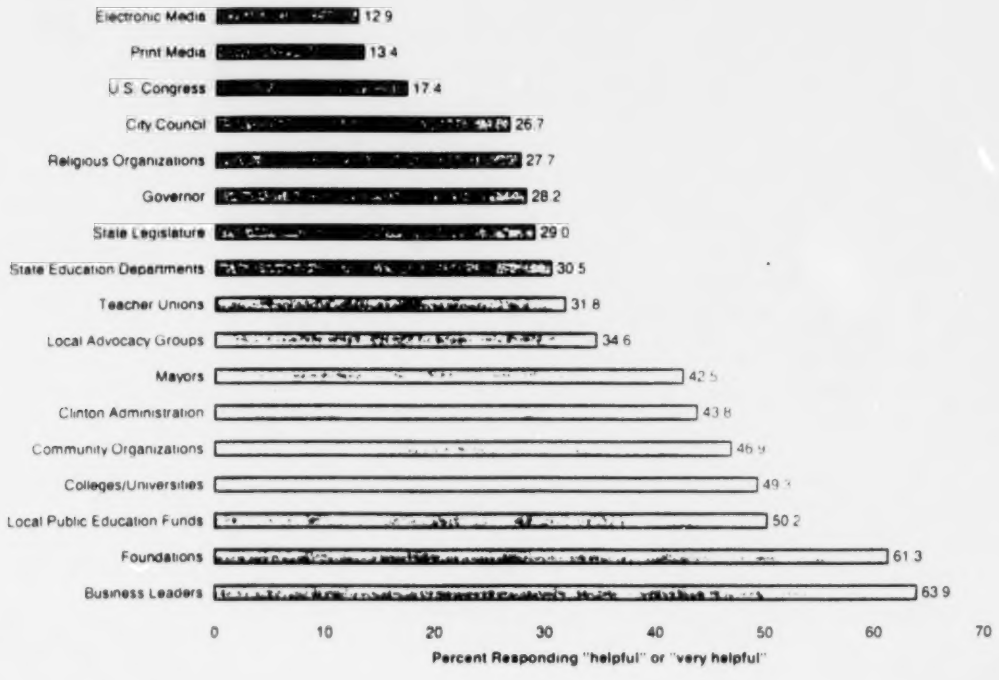
- More than six out of ten respondents felt that business leaders (63.9%) and foundations (61.3%) were benefiting their schools, giving these two groups the highest rankings in the 1999-2000 survey. Business leaders, foundations, and local public education funds have remained among the top three most helpful groups for the third consecutive poll.

- Colleges and universities (49.3%) and community organizations (46.9%) continue to receive favorable rankings, as they have both been listed among the top five most favorable groups during the 1995-96, 1997-98, and 1999-2000 surveys.

- Urban school leaders ranked teacher unions among the ten most helpful groups in the 1999-2000 poll. This rating increased from the 1997-98 survey when this group was ranked as the 14th most helpful.

Figure 2

Helpfulness of Groups to Urban Schools (1999-2000)



- State education departments continue to receive less favorable rankings, dropping from fifth in 1995-96, to ninth in 1997-98, and falling to the tenth most favorable group according to the 1999-2000 poll.

- The U.S. congress (17.4%), print media (13.4%), and electronic media (12.9%) received the lowest rankings, with fewer than one-fifth of all respondents giving these groups a positive evaluation in the 1999-2000 survey.

Table 1

Comparison of Group Helpfulness by Rank Order (1995-96, 1997-98, and 1999-2000)

Organization	99-00	97-98	95-96
Business Leaders	1	3	1
Foundations	2	1	*
Local Public Education Funds	3	2	2
Colleges/Universities	4	5	3
Community Organizations	5	4	*
Clinton Administration	6	8	6
Mayors	7	6	*
Local Advocacy Groups	8	7	4
Teacher Unions	9	14	7
State Education Departments	10	9	5

*Not included in given year or presented in a different manner.

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Most Important Needs

Urban school leaders encounter a myriad of issues including declining tax bases, meeting the needs of English Language Learners (ELL), transitory student populations, and an increasing teacher shortage. Which needs, however, do urban school leaders consider to be the most critical?

The survey asked urban school leaders to: *Identify what you believe to be the ten (10) most important or pressing needs of an urban school district.* The survey provided 44 items from which the respondents could choose. Table 2 displays the top ten needs in 1999-2000 and compares them with needs from the three previous surveys. Figure 3 ranks all the needs listed by urban educators in the 1999-2000 survey.

- Academic achievement was ranked as the most pressing need by 76.1% of the urban leaders in the 1999-2000 survey. Academic achievement remained the number one need for the *third* consecutive poll.

- Urban school leaders ranked recruiting teachers (60.9%) as the second most important need this year, as compared to ninth and 14th in the 1997-98 and 1995-96 polls, respectively.

- Six concerns have remained among the top ten needs in surveys conducted since 1995-96: academic achievement, professional development, public confidence, closing academic gaps, parental involvement, and securing additional funding.

Table 2

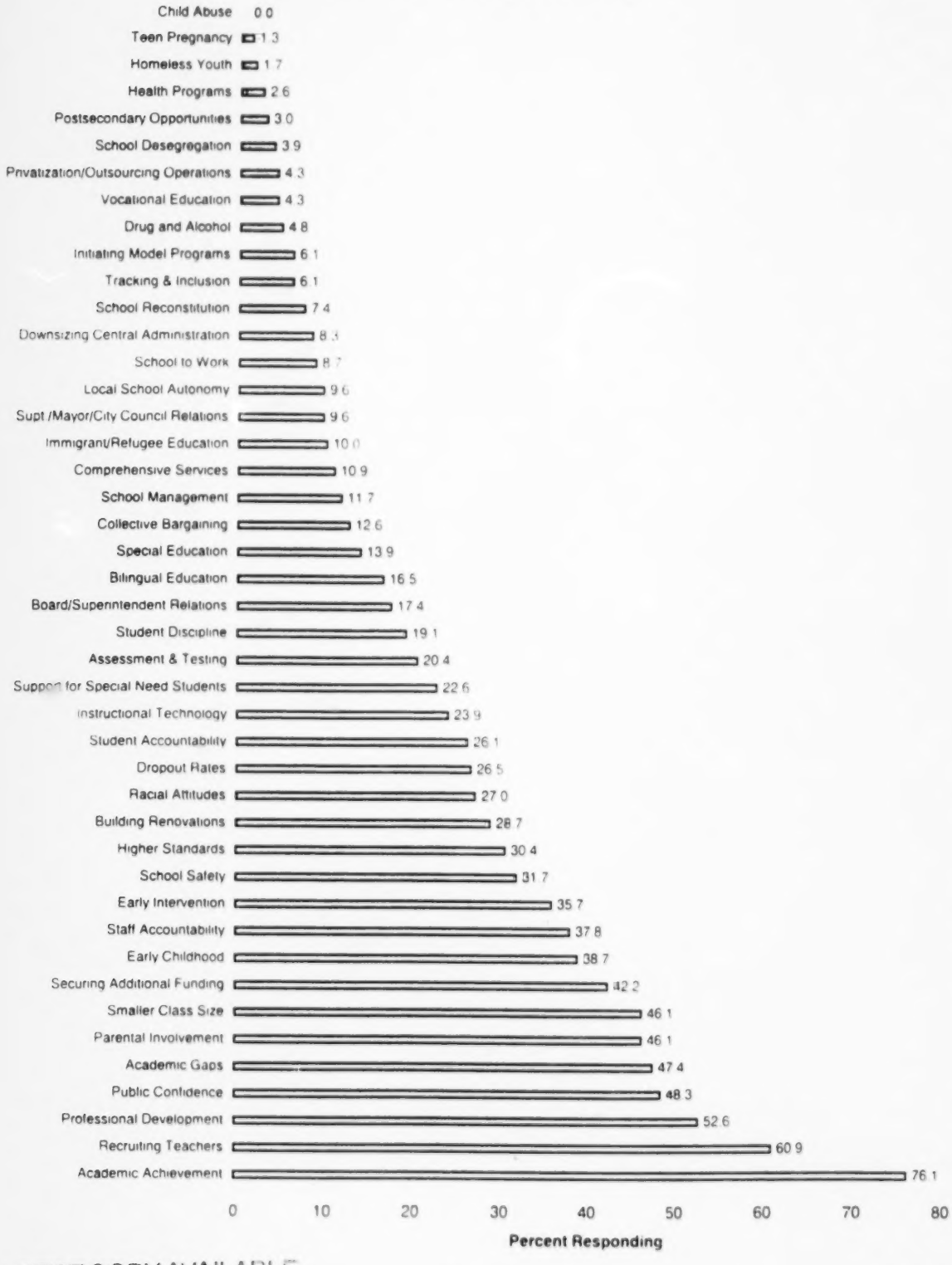
Top Ten Needs of Urban Schools

Need	99-00	97-98	95-96	93-94
Academic Achievement	1	1	1	8
Recruiting Teachers	2	9	14	*
Professional Development	3	3	6	*
Public Confidence	4	2	4	*
Academic Gaps	5	9	7	*
Parental Involvement	6.5	2	3	2
Smaller Class Size	6.5	6	*	*
Securing Additional Funding	8	4	2	7
Early Childhood	9	11	13	6
Staff Accountability	10	*	*	*

*Not rated in given year or presented in a different manner.

Figure 3

Urban School Needs (1999-2000)



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Most Common Urban School Reform Strategies

Urban public school systems continue the process of reform. Which reform strategies do urban school leaders use the most?

Urban school leaders were asked: *Which of the following measures has your district pursued in its general reform process?* The survey listed 25 education reform strategies and allowed respondents to check as many as apply to their district. Figure 4 displays the results from the 1999-2000 poll. Figure 5 and Table 3 show comparisons with the 1999-2000, 1997-98, and 1995-96 surveys.

- More than eight out of ten respondents stated that their school districts use professional development (85.6%) and enhance student reading programs (82.3%) as their two most commonly used reform strategies in the 1999-2000 poll.

- Professional development remains one of urban leaders' two most popular reforms for the *third* consecutive survey.

- The percent of urban school leaders reporting that they are reducing class size increased by over fifty percent, from 47.5% in 1997-98 to 72.6% in 1999-2000. Reducing class sizes rose from only the 12th most popular reform in 1997-98 to the sixth most common strategy in the 1999-2000 poll.

- The number of school leaders who indicated that their districts were decentralizing decision making has steadily decreased from 74.9% in 1997-98 to 57.7% in the 1999-2000 school year. This reform dropped in rank from the second most popular reform in 1995-96, to fourth in 1997-98, to 13th in the 1999-2000 survey.

- Professional development, higher content standards, higher performance standards, decentralized decision making, and partnerships with business and community leaders have all ranked among the top five most common reform strategies in at least two of the last three surveys.

- The percentage of persons who indicated that their districts were using partnerships with business leaders decreased from 86.1% in 1997-98 to 76.3% in 1999-2000.

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Figure 4

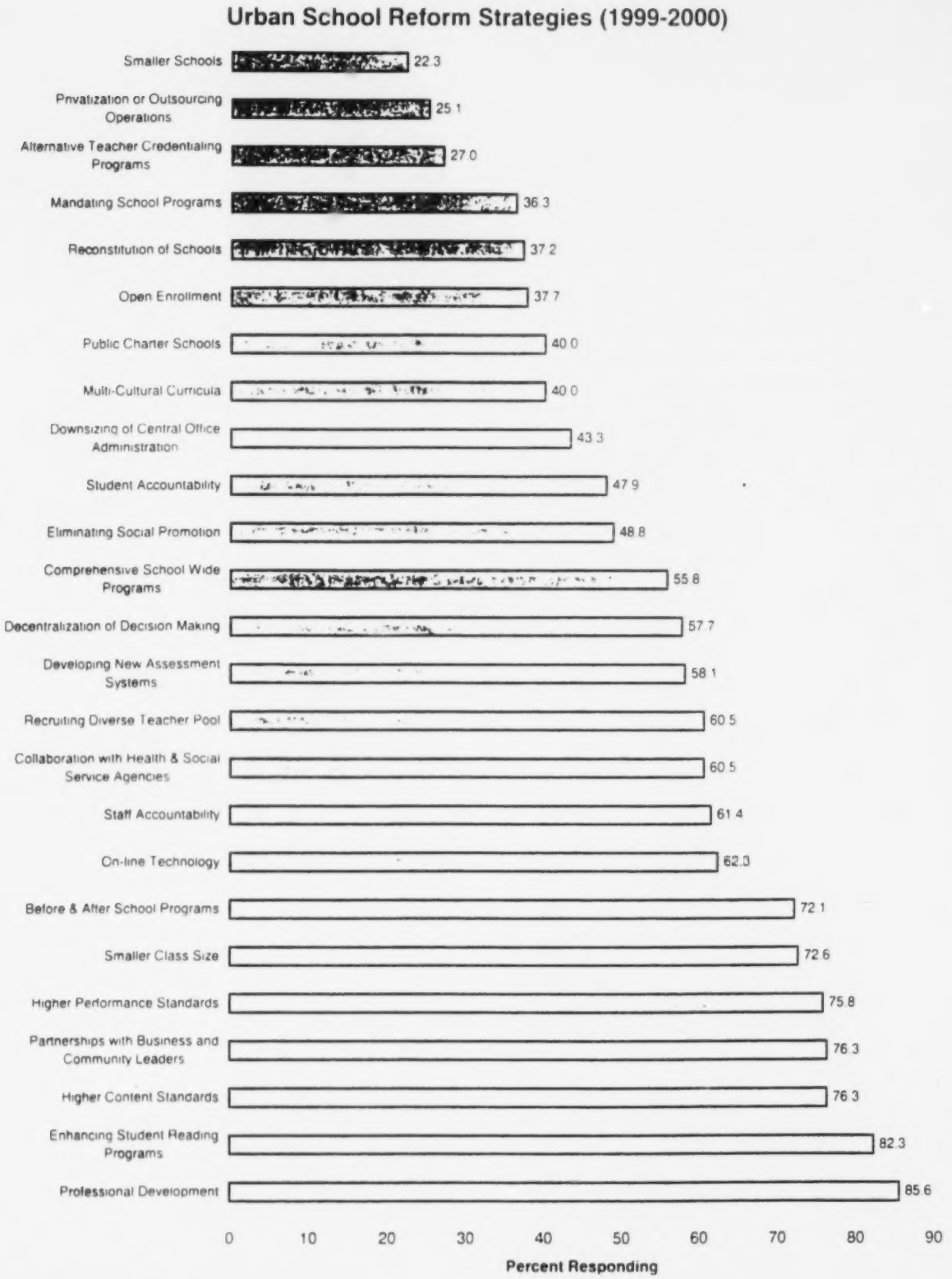

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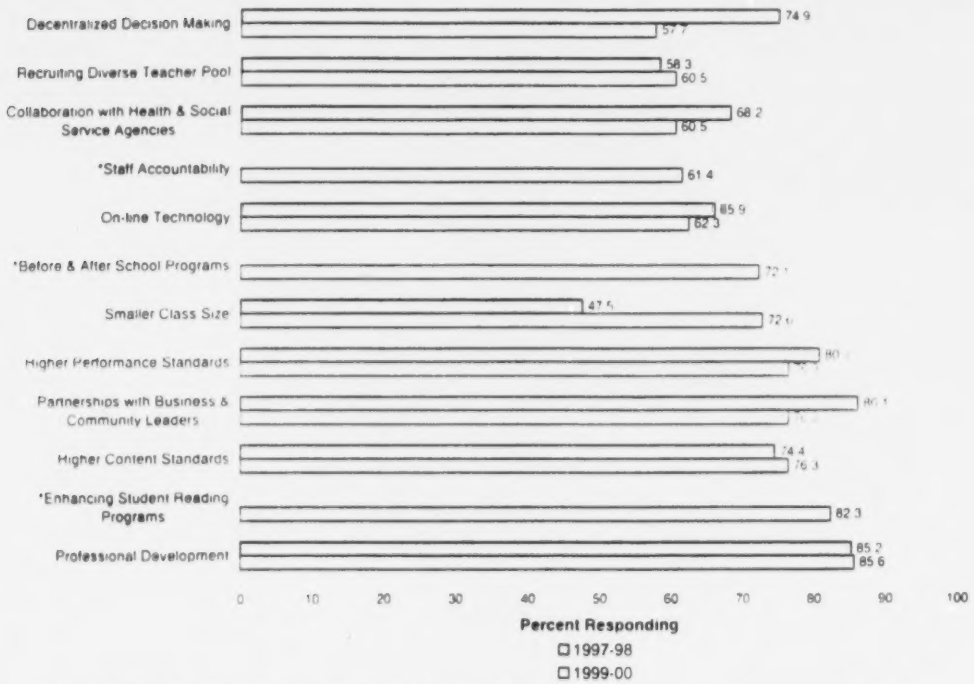
Figure 5

Urban School Reform Strategies (1997-98 and 1999-2000)



*Not included in given year or presented in a different manner

Table 3

Rank Order of Commonly Used Urban School Reform Strategies

Reform Strategy	99-00	97-98	96-95
Professional Development	1	2	1
Enhancing Student Reading Programs	2	*	*
Higher Content Standards	3.5	5	4
Partnerships with Business/Community Leaders	3.5	1	*
Higher Performance Standards	5	3	*
Smaller Class Size	6	12	*
Decentralized Decision Making	13	4	2

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Most Effective Urban School Reform Strategies

The short lived nature of some educational reforms indicates that these practices have varying degrees of success. Which strategies do urban school leaders perceive as the most effective in their districts?

The survey asked respondents to: *Rate the top three strategies that you perceive as the most effective in achieving the education goals for reform.* Twenty-five strategies were presented with the option to identify others. Tables 4 and 5 display the results. The ranking was developed by adding the number of "top three" votes each reform strategy received.

- Professional development was cited among the top two most effective reforms in the 1995-96, 1997-98, and 1999-2000 polls.
- On-line technology fell from the fifth most effective strategy in 1995-96 to a ranking of 21st in the 1999-2000 survey.
- The perception of decentralized decision making as a viable reform strategy has continued to decline, as its ranking dropped from third in 1995-96, to fourth in 1997-98, to ninth in the 1999-2000 survey results.

Table 4

Most Effective Reform Strategies (1999-2000)

Reform Strategy	Ranking
Professional Development	1
Enhancing Student Reading Programs	2
Staff Accountability	3
Higher Performance Standards	4
Smaller Class Size	5
Higher Content Standards	6
Comprehensive School Wide Reform	7
Student Accountability	8
Decentralization of Decision Making	9
Developing New Assessment Systems	10

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Table 5

Comparison of Most Effective Reform Strategies (1995-96, 1997-98 and 1999-2000)

Reform Strategy	95-96	97-98	99-00
Higher Standards	1	3	4
Professional Development	2	1	1
Decentralized Decision Making	3	4	9
New Assessment Systems	4	8	10
On-line Technology	5	9	21
Alternative Governance & Management	6		

*Not included in given year or presented in a different manner

Discussion

This poll asked how urban school leaders feel about such important issues as the future of urban education, the degree of helpfulness their schools receive from outside groups, the most pressing urban school needs, the most effective reform strategies, and the perceived effectiveness of these reform efforts.

1. Urban school leaders and members of colleges and universities who work with the Great City Schools continue to feel strongly optimistic about the future of urban schools. The results show that urban leaders have significantly increased their sense of optimism since the 1995-96 survey.

This survey does not examine why these respondents maintain a strong sense of hope about the future of urban education. However, these results may reflect a continued confidence that urban schools are making steady improvements in test scores, technology enhancements, and assessment and accountability systems. Urban school leaders appear to believe that the current reforms and improvement strategies are making a difference for their school systems.

2. Business leaders, foundations, and local public education funds continue to be viewed as the most helpful groups to urban public schools. These organizations give assistance, coordination, and funding for programs that often directly enhance educational opportunities for students.

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The U.S. Congress, print media, and electronic media received the lowest ratings. The leaders' perceptions of both the print and electronic media demonstrate the powerful, and often negative, impact these mediums have on our nation's schools.

Public involvement is crucial to the success of urban public education. It is clear that many groups are contributing to this process. The Council would need to ask its members how these groups have proven helpful in subsequent surveys. Are there specific programs, models, and strategies that are particularly successful? Can these models inform practices in other districts and schools? What types of assistance do urban school leaders want from these groups?

3. Improving academic achievement was cited as the number one need in urban public schools, for the third consecutive survey. The need to improve students' academic opportunities and achievement is urban education's bottom line. Meeting this goal will become ever more crucial as districts and states increase performance standards and accountability systems for students, teachers, and administrators.

Professional development and public confidence remain among the top most pressing needs. Parental involvement remained in the top ten, but it fell from the top three most important needs, where it had remained during the previous three surveys. Recruiting teachers has become a much more significant need during the 1999-2000 school year, receiving a second place ranking. This change reflects the severe teacher shortage that many districts are currently experiencing as well as predicted shortages during the next ten years.

4. Urban schools are often engaged in numerous reform efforts, including many that are not listed in this survey. Professional development has remained among the top two most popular reform strategies during the last three polls. This survey did not ask urban educators what *types* of professional development that their districts needed most.

Leaders who report using decentralized decision making have steadily decreased during the last three surveys, dropping from the second most popular reform in the 1995-96 poll to the fourth in the 1997-98 survey. The 1999-2000 results rank decentralized decision making as only the 13th most popular reform strategy. Current local reforms have shifted away from school based decision making toward more uniform content standards, assessment and accountability.

Class size reduction has become increasingly more popular in urban schools since the 1993-94 school year. The number of leaders who report using this reform increased by fifty percent during the last two surveys. This result is no surprise given the increase in federal funding available for schools to lower their class sizes and the increasing amount of research showing that it works.

5. Respondents stated that professional development, enhancing student reading programs, and staff accountability were their districts' most effective reforms. Professional development has remained one of the two most effective reforms for the three most recent surveys.

Higher performance standards and higher content standards were both listed among the top ten most effective reform strategies. These two strategies reflect the current wave of standards-based reform in the educational community.

In conclusion, the results of this survey indicate that urban school leaders are utilizing a variety of educational reform strategies to combat the challenging and pressing needs in their districts. Despite the obstacles, the leaders in our nation's urban schools remain overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of their schools.

Acknowledgements

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Technical Notes

Number and Percent of Survey Respondents

Group	Number	Percent
School Board Member	81	36.0%
Superintendent	19	8.4%
Deputy/Assistant/Associate Superintendent	60	26.7%
Other Educator	45	20.0%
College Representative	10	4.4%
Education Association	1	0.4%
Other	9	4.0%
Total	**225**	**99.9%**